

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***

*** Number 32: Netscape Releases Navigator Source Code--What Does it Mean?

Netscape has released the source code for its popular Navigator browser. Why would a company give away the very soul of its most popular program -- for free?! Kevin Savetz and Neil Randall put on their pundit hats and discuss this strange turn of events.

Neil Randall: Kevin, I have to admit I'm a bit mystified. Net geeks jumped onto the Netscape bandwagon all over again with the news that they were going to release the source code for Navigator. I guess I just don't get what the excitement's all about. First of all, with all the developmental effort Netscape itself is pouring into Navigator, resulting in every new feature you could think of, why would anybody bother dorking about with the source code and rolling their own version of the browser? Second, this is the same company that made us pay for browsers in the first place -- technically, at least, Navigator has cost \$39 or more -- so it's not as if they're doing it out of the goodness of their hearts. Third, the only people who are going to bother with the source code are UNIX users, hardly the largest contingent out there. So what's the big deal?

Kevin Savetz: You've got to admit, Neil, that it's rather strange -- even unprecedented -- for a company like Netscape to start giving away the source code to one of its staple products. Why does it surprise you to see all the attention that's receiving? Can you imagine the brouhaha if Microsoft started giving away the source code to, say, Word?

Hackers will "dork around" with the source because everyone thinks they can build a better mouse trap. Don't like how Navigator mis-handles tables? Fix it! Wish that it could do cascading style sheets? Make it so. Releasing the source is an action that will produce undeniable benefits to Netscape. In the first weeks after the source was released, programmers submitted hundreds of bug-fixes and enhancements. From Netscape's perspective, it's an optimal solution: why hire more programmers to do your dirty work when Netizens will do it for free? (By the way, I disagree with your assertion that only UNIX geeks will bother playing with the source. Navigator is available for a lot of platforms. Windows, Mac and other geeks are all in on the game.)

But hacking Navigator itself isn't what most programmers will want to do -- many folks will use the source as part of their own projects. Netscape's licenses allow that. Although the company has placed so many rules, riders, and exceptions to those licences that a lot of programmers have decided that this gift horse is better left back in the barn. Just try reading the licenses (they, along with the source itself, are at <http://www.mozilla.org>). Then read the FAQs that explain them. Then read the FAQs that explain the FAQs.

An excerpt from one of those FAQs: "All modifications to the original code released by Netscape are governed by the Netscape Public License... this will ensure that developers will return their modifications to the source code to the community. The company feels that this is important to ensure long term viability of the source development effort."

A lot of pundits were saying that Microsoft was trouncing Netscape in the browser battle. Releasing the source code may have been Netscape's crazy, last-ditch

effort to maintain its market dominance.

NFR: If I can borrow from your own schtick, Kevin, why is it a good thing that NS will let Netizens do their programming for them? When MS turned to the public for testing, releasing a beta of Windows 95 and basically saying, help us make it work properly, they got roundly trashed by just about everybody. And that was just a beta program, not a source-code program. I just don't see that it's a good thing to get other people to do your work for you. It smells a bit like scab labor.

My main point, though, is that I see Netscape getting good and plentiful press for essentially turning back the clock and pretending that the Net is all about independent hackers, and that's just not the case any more, no matter how you and I might wish it were. I think it's good PR in the short term, but disastrous for NS (and hence the Net) in the long term. But hey, that's just me.

That said, I agree with you (I hate doing that) about the possibility of building Navigator into third-party products. And about the amazing stupidity of the licensing. Then again, I don't think NS ever enforced their Navigator licensing, at least not that I heard of, so maybe it's much smoke, no fire.

KMS: The difference between a beta program and a source code program is this: with a beta program, a company asks for help in perfecting its product. With a source code giveaway, the company says "Don't like it? Fix it yourself, bucko." (As a side note, I see nothing wrong with releasing beta software. But I think it's egregious that Microsoft sold a Windows 98 "preview" earlier this year -- essentially charging users for the privilege of beta-testing the product. But that's a different discussion.)

Netscape is by no means trying to turn back the clock. Before all those .com's started springing up, the Net was indeed about independent hackers sharing information. It was NOT about eight-page, lawyer approved license agreements. Netscape isn't pretending. It's firmly rooted in today's Internet reality: stockholders, contracts, corporate bonuses.

OK, last question. You say that this will be but disastrous for Netscape in the long term. I say you're way off the mark. Here's what I see: tons of third-party development on the source code leads to better browsers, a wider variety of related products (web servers, plug-ins, WebTV-type gadgets and the like). All these Navigator-derived products will mean more people using Netscape's products, increased stock value, and sustained market dominance into the new century. So, wise guy, what do you see in your crystal ball?

NFR: I understand what you're saying about the Navigator-derived products and so on, but my real belief is that, once you give one thing away, you're expected to give everything away. I think the UNIX community will handle this thing more or less as it's meant to be handled, with NS respected for providing source code, but I don't think the Windows or Mac communities share that value. They've been dealing with proprietary code for so long that the idea of "fix it yourself, bucko" won't appeal in the same way. But for both groups, the UNIX and the Mac/Windows communities, the whole thing could backfire. The UNIX people could start denouncing NS if they don't release the source of all their products, while the Mac/Windows people might start thinking that NS products aren't as "serious" as others. I realize this is a somewhat foggy crystal ball, but I think it's showing

something potentially valid.

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